DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 058 184 TE 002 492

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TITLE Possible Relationships between African Languages and Black English Dialects: Implications for Teaching Standard English as an Alternate Dialect.
PUB DATE Dec 70
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (56th, Atlanta, December 1970)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *African Culture; Comparative Analysis; Course Content; Diachronic Linguistics; *English Instruction; Grammar; Language Development; *Negro Dialects; Negro History; Research; Slavery; Social Influences; Speech; *Standard Spoken Usage; Theories; *Verbs

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the historical aspects of Black English in light of recent descriptive studies. Linguistic investigation has established the following points: (1) There is a Black English dialect; (2) Black English has systematic rules which differ from those of Standard English; (3) There are indications that lead to the conclusion that there are historical connections between Black English and coastal West African languages. Black English has a cohesive, structured grammatical system, i.e., it is a language system. According to the creolization theory, black people brought to the New World as slaves first learned a form of pidgin English. This theory postulates that Black English developed as a result of the following influences: language interference, nonstandard linguis ic models, and isolation factors. The languages which are the most significant to the historical study of American black dialects are those which were spoken in the Guinea slave coast area; most of them are in the Niger-Congo language family. Black English has two perfective distinctions in its verb system which have no equivalents in Standard English. The grammatical characteristics common to Black English verbs also occur in West African languages. An immediate implication of this study is that the history of the English language must be broadened to include the Afro-American tradition. (CK)

ED058184

December 29, 1970

Possible Relationships Between African Languages and Black English Dialect: Implications for Teaching Standard English as an Alternate Dialect

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The linguistic history of black and white dialects of English have had a coordinate time of development in this country. The first permanent English settlement was founded in 1607; the first black people arrived in 1619.

However, few studies of the structure of Black English[1] were made before 1960. The language of black people was not considered a subject for serious study by the student of language: Black English dialects were considered merely "corruptions" of Standard English. Lorenzo Turner and Melville Herskovits initiated serious linguistic study into the history of Black English dialects in America. Herskovits, in his book The Myth of the Negro Past (1941), and Turner in his Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (1949), pointed out the rich and varied linguistic background of Black English dialects by indicating the connections between black American dialects and African languages, especially the coastal West African languages. For example, Turner's knowledge of West African languages helped him discover 4,000 words in the Gullah dialect which he traced back to Wolof, Mende, Twi, Ewe, Igbo, Efik, and other West African languages of the Niger-Congo family.

The next major impetus in the study of Black English occurred in the decade of the 60's, especially after 1965. The majority of these studies have concentrated on the synchronic description of Black English. The Center for Applied Linguistics has published material in three major areas: 1) the description of Black English in urban areas, 2) the publication of a guide in urban language study field techniques, and 3) suggestions as to how

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to implement the knowledge acquired in the urban language studies. William A. Stewart of the Education Study Center, Washington, D.C., has been the major contributor to the historical study of Black English.

This paper will be concerned primarily with the historical aspects of Black English dialect in light of those recent descriptive studies. Linguistic investigation has established the following points:

1) There is a Black English dialect.
2) Black English has systematic rules which differ from Standard English.[2]
3) There are indications that may permit us to conclude that there are historical connections between Black English and coastal West African languages.

Black English has a cohesive, structured grammatical system, i.e. it is a language system. Many of the features of that system are shared with Standard English dialect; others are shared with dialects of English other than Standard English; a few features occur only in Black English. These exclusive features of Black English are the ones most intriguing to the historical researcher. Systematic differences in Black English, which occur only within that language system, may be the result of interaction between coastal West African languages of the Niger-Congo language family and the dialects of English encountered by black people when they first arrived in America.

According to the creolization theory, black people brought to the New World as slaves first learned a form of pidgin English.[3] This theory postulates that Black English developed as a result of the following influences: language interference, nonstandard linguistic models, and isolation factors.

First, language interference, that is, the grammatical structure and the sound system of a speaker's first language interfering with the learning of another language, influenced the phonological and syntactic structure of that form of English. Although it was possible for the slave to learn a critical vocabulary and a few sentences and phrases of the new language, it was impossible for him to master the morphology and syntax in a short time in unfavorable language learning circumstances. Thus, pidgin English with its simplified grammatical structure,[4] became the means of communication. This pidgin English, influenced by a substratum of elements of the African languages spoken by the black people when they first arrived in this country, was the resulting language system. As the number of black people born in this country increased, pidgin English became the first language of more and more people. Technically, creole English then succeeded pidgin English.

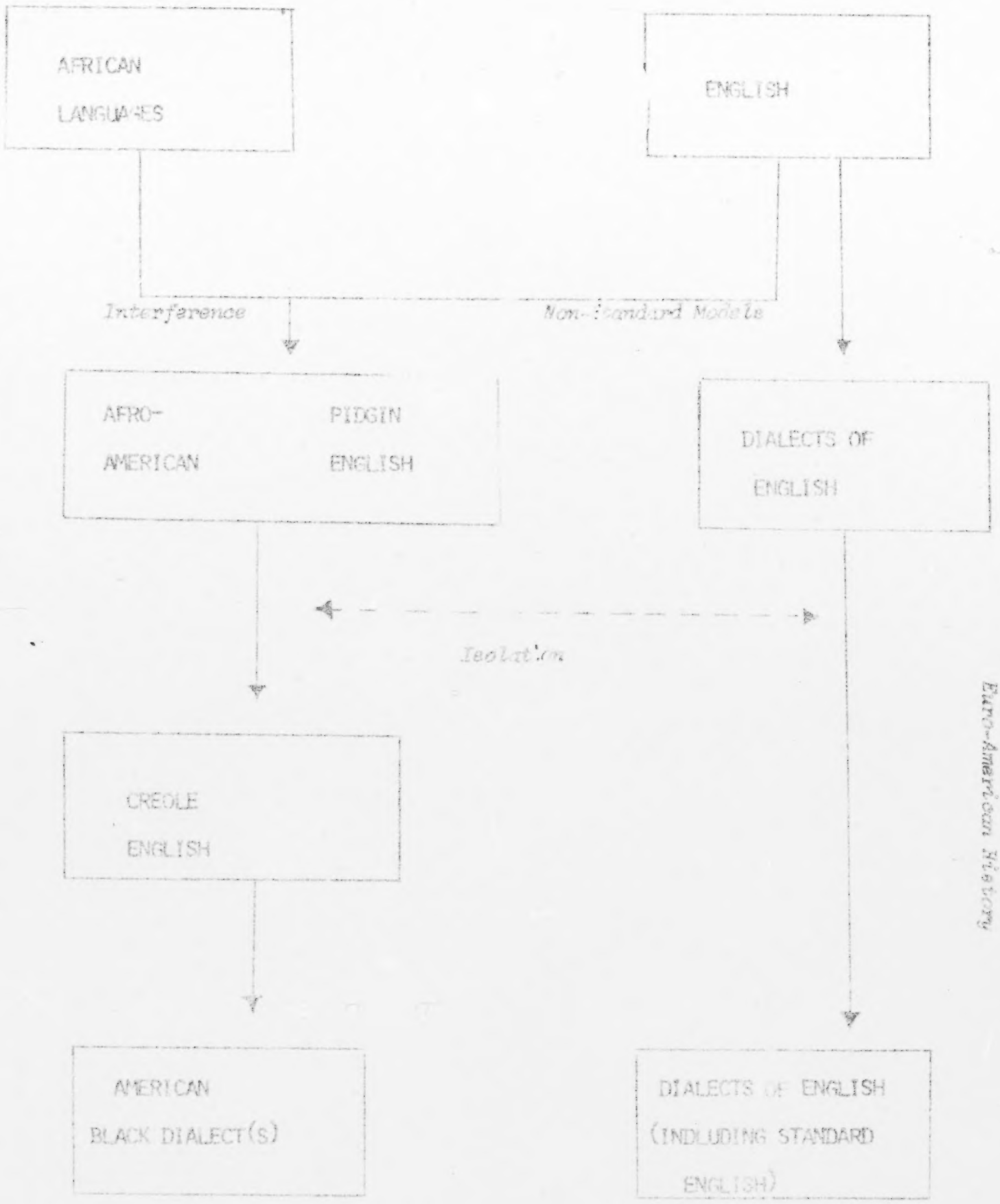
Second, nonstandard linguistic models were provided by the English-speaking persons with whom the slaves usually had contact. The overseers were usually speakers of lower class English, e.g. a nonstandard British dialect or a pidgin (or creole) English. Consequently, elements of these dialects influenced and may have remained in Black English, for example, aks for ask.

Third, geographical and social isolation prevented the assimilation of Black English dialects into the mainstream of American English. Gullah, a black American dialect which still retains many linguistic features directly traceable to West African languages, is an example of the pidginization and creolization processes.

An outline of the postulated creolazation precess is presented below:

Chart -- History of American Black Dialect(s)

HISTORY OF AMERICAN BLACK DIALECT(S)



As William A. Stewart stated, "At least some of the particular features of American Negro dialects are neither skewings nor extensions of white dialect patterns, but are in fact structural vestiges of an earlier plantation creole, and ultimately of the original slave-trade pidgin English which gave rise to it." What "structural vestiges" could have remained in black American dialect as a result of these earlier influences? Since black people in this country came originally from a large number of African tribes, it may be impossible to trace linguistic elements back to a specific language. However, records of the slave-trade days provide a glimpse of areas of special interest to these investigations. Most of the slaves were shipped to America from the western coastal areas of Africa, from Senegal to Angola. Herskovits computed tables from Elizabeth Donnan's "Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America" (Carnegie Institution Publication, No. 409, Vol. IV) to show that in the early years of slave trading, the number of slaves brought from Africa far outnumbered the slaves brought from the West Indies. In the years between 1710 and 1769, over 40,000 slaves direct from Africa passed through the Virginia port as compared with 7,000 from the West Indies. From 1733 to 1785 in South Carolina, the figures were some 65,000 slaves direct from Africa and 2,000 from the West Indies. The probable cultural and linguistic influence from the Old Country would seem to be obvious.

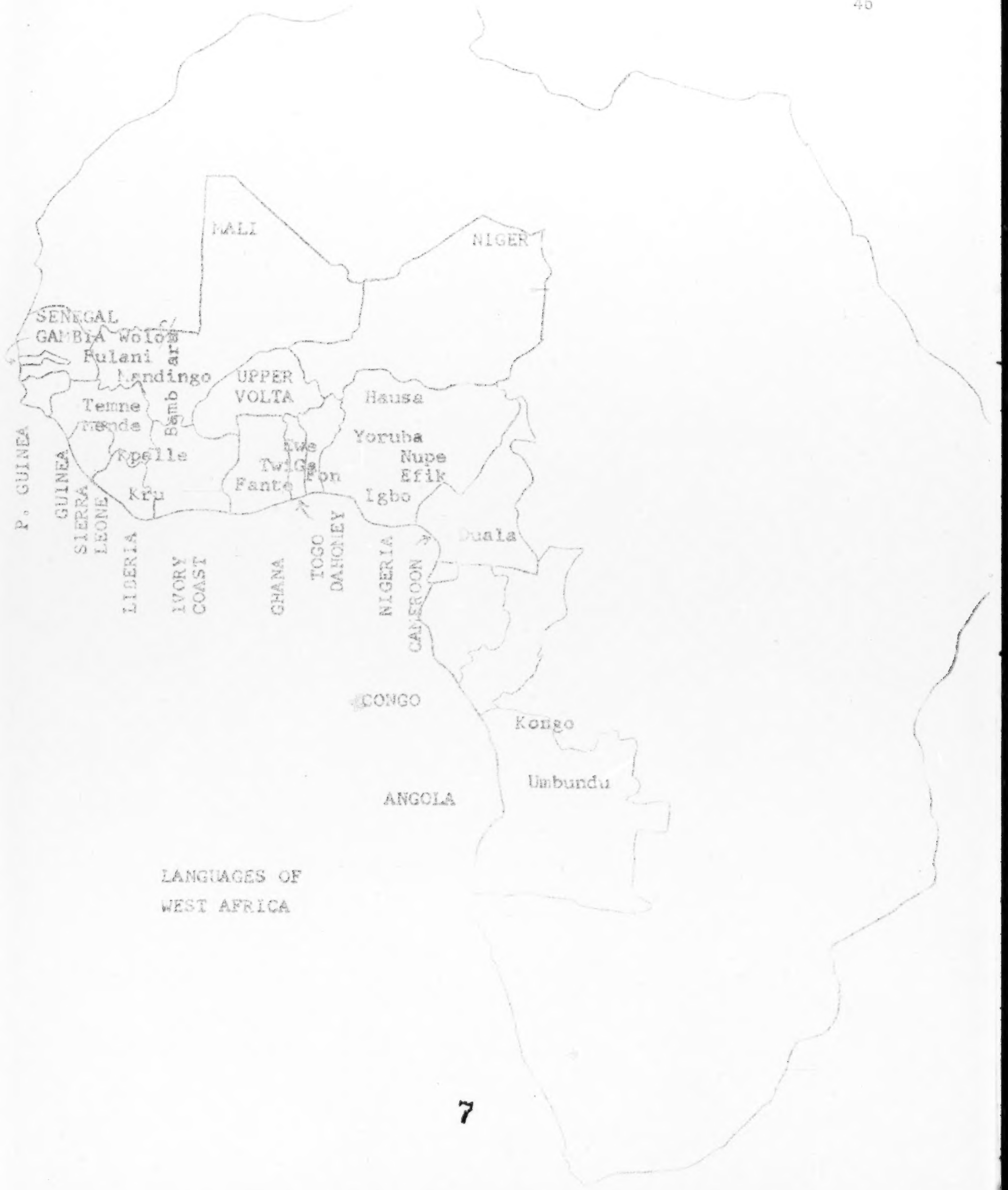
Maps -- Africa and America - Slave Trade Areas

The languages which are the most significant to the historical study of American black dialects are those which were spoken in the Guinea slave coast area. These language, most of them in the Niger-Congo language family, are shown on the following map:

Map -- Languages of West Africa

The Niger-Congo languages are also the ones which proved most significant in the linguistic studies of Turner, Herskovits, and Stewart.

SLAVE TRADE AREAS



LANGUAGES OF
WEST AFRICA

The languages of the Niger-Congo family exhibit certain common characteristics which are interesting in terms of Black English structural characteristics. Although it is not possible at this time to show a definite causal relationship, the following discussion will attempt to point out some of the similarities in usage and construction. For example, the verb

systems of some Niger-Congo language, e.g. Efik and Ewe, differentiate between an aspect of habitual (customary) or repetitive actions and aspect of completion. In Efik it is possible to express an action which occurs habitually (indicated by an aspect marker) in the present, past, or future with time determined by context rather than by verbal inflection. In fact, it is usually easier to refer to aspect rather tan tense when discussing these verb systems.[6] There seems to be some indication that Black English also uses aspect rather than tense in some verbal constructions.

Richard A. Long analyzed the grammatical similarities between the middle Georgia black dialect recorded by Joel Chandler Harris in the Uncle Remus stories and the languages of the Niger-Congo family. Based on the verb system of the Niger-Congo languages and its English translation, Long produced the following comparative paradigm:[7]

Niger-Congo verb system	English translation
Present	he go
Near Past	he gone
Remote Past	he been gone
Future	he going to go
Aspect of Progress	he going
Aspect of Completion	he done gone
Past Aspect of Repetition	he been going

Long further pointed out that he had heard speakers of Black English use in a meaningful way all the forms which appear in the English paradigm above. Unfortunately, Professor Long's paradigm is too general to establish any definite relationship.

William A. Stewart has pointed out the lack of verbal inflection in Black English to show the difference between the simple present and the past.[8]

'I see it' in Black English can mean 'I see it' or 'I saw it'. However, the negatives show that both grammatical categories exist:

Present	Past
I see it	(I saw it)
I don't see it	I ain't see it.

Twi, Igbo, Ewe, Efik--all Niger-Congo languages--Jamaican Creole, and Gullah all exhibit a similar lack of inflection to show time. Present, past, and sometimes future time are indicated by context rather than by verbal inflection:

Gullah: I de go (or I go) 'I go, I went'

Jamaican Creole: Yesterday me buy salt fish.

Ewe: meyi 'I go' (no particular time)
Subj + Verb

Igbo: Àdâ bù abọ 'Ada is (was) carrying a basket.
Subj + Verb + Obj

Twi: ɔ́fà
Subj + Verb 'He takes' (present, past--all times)

(´ ` ^ = tone markings)

Fasold and Wolfram demonstrated that the Black English verb system has four perfective distinctions while Standard English has two.[9] The present perfect and the past perfect are similar in the two grammars. However, Black English has a completive (near past?) perfect and a remote time perfect:

Completive	I done walked.
Remote time	I been walked (some time ago), I been seen it, I been had it there for about three years.

Thus, Black English has two perfective distinctions in its verb system which have no equivalents in Standard English. Some dialects use a completive distinction similar to the one above, 'I done ate my supper', but the remote time construction is used only in Black English.

West African Pidgin English, a language basically African in structure and English in vocabulary, has a verb system which provides an interesting comparison with the Black English perfectives:[10] (c = ch, o = ɔ)

Present	i cop	he eats
Continuative-Habitual	i de cop	he is eating or he eats (habitually)
Past	i bin go	he went
Past Completive	i don cop	he has eaten
Past Continuative-Habitual	i bin de cop	he was eating (habitual)
	past + habitual	
Perfective	i don cop	he has eaten (completed)
Past Perfective	i bin don cop	he had eaten
	past + compl.	

There are two aspect markers which occur before the verb: de - continuing or habitual action and don - completed action; bin is the past tense marker.

Fasold has also demonstrated that the invariant form of the verb be in Black English occurs in exactly the environments in which conjugated forms of be occur in Standard English.[11] This use of invariant be has the meaning of habitual or repeated action:

Standard English	He is driving.
Black English	He is driving
	He's driving.
	He driving
	He be driving (everytime I see him).

Fasold also showed that all occurrences of invariant be cannot be explained as the result of deleted will or would and also cannot be explained as being the same as vestigial subjunctive be in Standard English. Habitual be has no equivalent in Standard English.

Loflin demonstrated that habitual be and am are not equivalent forms.[12] Loflin's informant rejected as ungrammatical the starred forms below:

I don't <u>be</u> mad except sometimes I be.

*I don't <u>be</u> mad except sometimes I was.

*I don't <u>be</u> mad except sometimes I been.

*I don't <u>be</u> mad except sometimes I am.

If <u>be</u> and <u>am</u> were equivalent forms, then '*I don't be mad except sometimes I am' should be an acceptable paraphrase of 'I don't be mad except sometimes I be'.

Habitual and continuative aspect are elements of Efik and Ewe as well as West African Pidgin verb systems. In Efik any verbal construction can have an habitual counterpart:

M_1 + M_2 ... + si + Verb stem

M + construction marker such as subject pronoun, completive marker, etc

In Ewe <u>na</u> is suffixed to the verb: meyina 'I generally go.'

Subj + Verb + Habitual Marker
na = 'to be, to stay'

The arguments presented in this paper have centered on verb systems. Other features of Black English include lack of noun inflection to show possession: 'John cousin' instead of 'John's cousin': lack of a plural marker on nouns: 'five cent' instead of 'five cents': collapsing of pronoun forms: 'he book' instead of 'his book': and one final verb feature, the missing copula: 'he big' instead of 'he is big'.

One can speculate that these features are the function of the creolization process. However, the grammatical characteristics also occur in coastal West African languages. Relexification may account for the fact that the morphemes of Black English, Gullah and Jamaican Creole often differ from West African languages while similar grammatical constructions remain. Linguists have investigated Black English grammar and noted the similarities and parallels between Black English, the various related creoles, and the coastal West African languages.

An immediately obvious implication of this study is that the history of the English language, and studies of it, must be broadened to include the Afro-American tradition as well as the Euro-American tradition. Language teachers must be aware of the linguistically significant differences of Black English dialect and their historical background when attempting to teach a standard variety of English as an alternate dialect.

In fact, the historical background and grammatical characteristics of Black English present the classroom teacher with an interesting although often difficult situation. The dictum, "Accept the child as he is," implies the acceptance of cultural and linguistic plurality. Linguistic plurality offers the teacher an opportunity to employ contrastive techniques to teach (at least indirectly) language structure by allowing students to hear and to compare more than one way of speaking. This teaching technique implies in turn that the teacher must be prepared to accept personally and to implement professionally a linguistic attitude toward and evaluation of dialects. As Orlando Taylor of the Language Education Program at the Center for Applied Linguistics stated, Standard English is primarily a "tool for educational acquisition" and should not preclude instruction in Black English.

Instruction in Black English necessitates the use of a multi-dialectal teaching method. The use of this method is different from and in some ways more difficult than teaching a foreign language. First, the differences between dialects are not as striking as the differences between languages such as English and German. Second, there is the problem of functi nal interference. The black child may object to learning "white English." Why should the child have to learn the teacher's dialect, if the teacher doesn't learn and understand his dialect? Third, if Standard English is the "school language" and restricted to that environment, then Standard English teaching does not receive reinforcement outside the classroom.

How then can the teacher successfully use linguistic techniques in a classroom which has speakers of more than one dialect? Research has indicated that language instruction should be based on the language system the child already uses, i.e. the home dialect, as well as on the language system one wishes the child to acquire, i.e. Standard English.[13] In other words, since Black English dialect is a structured, coherent language system which is different in certain aspects from Standard English, a multi-dialectal teaching method can be employed effectively in the classroom teaching of Standard English as an alternate dialect.

Therefore, the language classroom should provide opportunities for comparing different language systems. The child's home dialect should be respected and used in a favorable way in classroom comparisons. Finally, Standard English should be presented as an alternate dialect, a tool for educational and later vocational purposes. In these ways, the child can be most effectively encouraged to acquire a Standard English dialect.

NOTES

1. The term Black English is used in this paper to refer to the dialects of English which have been described by sociolinguistic researchers in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. These dialects exhibit pronounced similarities in phonology, syntax, and semantics; therefore, it is possible to speak in terms of one dialect. Although the terms Nonstandard Negro English and Negro dialect are also used to refer to this dialect, I prefer to use the term Black English in order to take advantage of the current positive meaning of 'black'.

2. The recent study and description of dialects has revealed that each dialect has a predictable grammatical system. Each of these language systems is an efficient means of communication in its culture. If one dialect is different from another dialect, it is 'nonstandard' only if the other dialect is first set up as a standard by which to measure or judge it. A standard dialect of a language is the result of a concensus of opinion, usually by an educated minority, as to what the standard language should consist of phonologically, syntactically, and semantically. It is an ideal lingua franca -- usually claimed by all but actually used by few (or none).

3. A pidgin language is characterized by two conditions: 1) its grammatical system is sharply reduced, and 2) it is not the native language of anyone

who uses it. When a pidgin language becomes the native language of those who use it, it becomes a creole language. (See Robert A. Hall, Pidgin and Creole Languages, xii).

4. The term 'simplified' as used here indicates maximally efficient grammatical structure. All redundant features are stripped away. One good example would be the third person singular -s in the present tense. In the sentence, "He says," the pronoun he indicates third person singular: the -s is redundant.

5. See William A. Stewart, "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects," Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 6 (1968).

6. Tense refers to time: aspect refers to other elements of the verb such as repetition or completion without necessarily referring to time. In fact, tense and aspect are mutually exclusive in some Niger-Congo verb systems, e.g. Fulani.

7. See Richard A. Long, The Uncle Remus Dialect: A Preliminary Linguistic View, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), p. 6.

8. William A. Stewart, "Urban Negro Speech: Sociolinguistic Factors Affecting English Teaching," Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 7 (Spring 1969), p. 50.

9. Ralph W. Fasold and Walt Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in Teaching Standard English in the Inner City, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970), pp. 61-62.

10. See David Dwyer and David Smith, An Introduction to West African Pidgin English, p. 132.

11. See Ralph W. Fasold, "Tense and the Form Be in Black English," Language, Vol. 46 (December 1969), pp. 763-776.

12. See Marvin D. Loflin, "On the Structure of the Verb in a Dialect of American Negro English." To appear in Linguistics.

13. See Joan C. Baratz, A Bi-Dialectal Test for Determining Language Proficiency, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1968). This test indicated that children perform proficiently in their own dialects. It also showed that test can be biased against children who do not speak Standard English.

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